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THE CHILD-LABOR PROBLEM: FACT VERSUS SENTIMENTALITY.

BY THE LATE JULIA MAGRUDER.

THERE is, perhaps, no question of public economy in the present day as to which so deep and wide-spread an interest is manifested as the question of the employment of children as wage-earners, especially in mills and factories. The agitators of this subject are of three classes. The first and largest class is composed of ignorant sentimentalists, who plunge into the subject on the impulse of emotional feeling, rather than on a basis of knowledge and judgment. The second and smallest class is composed of rapacious mill-owners, who are influenced solely by the desire for cheap labor. The third class—that to which this paper is addressed—consists of serious and intelligent men and women, who desire to have the facts of the situation fairly presented, in order that a just discrimination between true and false may be made. Members of this last class will understand and allow for the fact, frankly avowed, that it is not easy to arrive at a perfectly just and accurate presentation of the case. It is a simple matter, however, to bring to bear upon this burning question the ordinary rules of common sense; and that is what is now attempted.

By all accepted rules of evidence, the actual knowledge, as well as the reasonable credibility, of witnesses must be considered before their testimony is entitled to acceptance. On this ground, I wish to consider what value, as evidence, should be placed upon the testimony of the writers on this subject with whose articles I am acquainted. I shall have to treat this branch of my subject briefly; but, if space permitted, I could elaborate the theme, to the fuller enlightenment of my readers and my own greater satisfaction.

The first written words which I can recall, as to this matter,

were from Mrs. and Miss Van Vorst, two American women long resident in Paris, who wrote a book called "*The Woman Who Toils*," on the basis, as they claimed, of a residence as actual mill-hands, in the mill-towns described. This book I opened with serious interest and intention; but its first pages disturbed my confidence so deeply that by the time I had reached the point at which Miss Van Vorst informs the earnest men and women, for whom her book was presumably intended:

"Luxuries to me are what necessities are to another. A boot too heavy, a dress ill-hung, a stocking too thick, are annoyances which, to the self-indulgent woman of the world, are absolute discomforts,"

adding a list of the prices paid by her for her underclothes, silk petticoat, shoes, hat and tailor-made costume, making a total of four hundred and forty-seven dollars for the raiment in which she stood—speaking of the mill-hands as "people from whose contact I had hitherto pulled my skirts away," and adding, "Friends had said to me, 'Your hands will betray you!'"—I threw the book aside, as unworthy of serious consideration. Later, however, finding that it was being seriously considered, I returned to it and read every word attentively.

As I wish to confine myself strictly to the limited field in which I can speak with the authority of over twenty years' study of the question from a near point of view, I pass over what these two authors say of the conditions existing in the Northern mill-village which, they tell us, they lived in as regular factory-hands, and content myself with saying that, if their inspection of the Southern cotton-mills had been made by going over them in a balloon, it would have been quite as accurate, and a great deal less misleading to the public. Yet, in the writing of both these authors, there is an appearance of the most painstaking effort to be accurate—many of the statements being put in the (supposed) dialect of the Southern mill-hands. To quote only one example of this: The report had probably reached Mrs. Van Vorst, in Paris, that it is a trick speech in the South to say "you-all" and "we-all," her informant having thought it unnecessary to explain that this word "all" signifies plurality, and that it is only another way of saying "all of you," and "all of us." The idea that any one, of no matter what rank and condition, should say "he-all" and "she-all" is obviously absurd. Yet continually Mrs. Van Vorst puts into the mouths of her Southern mill-hands such phrases as

these: "He-all is sick to-day," "She-all works in the mill." This (and many other examples of the same kind) attempt to give an air of reality to her "poor-white talk" is simply audacious, when one considers how easy it is to disprove. Not knowing that the key-note to this dialect is economy and brevity of utterance, she makes the children say: "Yes, meaum," where they would inevitably have said "yes'm," and she renders as "eleavun" the word which would have been pronounced "'lev'n." The word "about," which is habitually cut short, even among educated Southerners, she makes these children call "abeabout," instead of "'bout," as would have been the natural thing.

This matter of a clearly invented dialect is of course unimportant, except in so far as it throws light upon the methods and ideals which have governed these writers in dealing with so grave and important a question.

As to the subject-matter of the articles by Mrs. and Miss Van Vorst, their position appears to be shared by so many whose zeal is not according to knowledge, that it seems worth while for one who has studied the question so long, at close range, to speak from the authority of that position. These writers, after drawing what I do not hesitate to qualify as a hysterical and sentimental picture of the misery, filth and degradation of the children in the cotton-mills, challenge their readers to compare the lives of these children with the life of Mr. Carnegie's little daughter, who, they tell us, had three cabins of an ocean greyhound thrown into one, in order that she might have space to play in during her trip across the water. This comparison of the lot of the mill-children with the lot of a child with whom there is not and never could be any rational ground of comparison, leads me to ask, for the sake of some practical advancement in the matter, that a comparison be made which is to the point; namely, the comparison of the mental, moral and physical conditions of the children now working in the cotton-mills with the lot of those same children without the opportunity and the performance of this work.

The whole question hinges on the point of *the alternative*. If the children employed in these mills would, otherwise, be living in decent homes, going to school, eating sufficient and wholesome food, getting some sort of moral, mental and manual training, then, without question, mill-work for children deserves to be decried as a flagrant social evil. As a matter of fact, however,

the alternative presented to these particular children is to live in dilapidated houses, wear wretched clothing and eat food which is inadequate in quantity and abominable in quality, and to have the constant association of other children in whom poverty and idleness have fostered vice, exactly as they would do in themselves—children, in fact, to whom the lowest specimens of mill-hands are superior in every respect. For the very fact that a child is employed in the mill presupposes a possession, more or less, of the qualities of order, application, punctuality, mental concentration and a certain amount of manual skill—not one of which qualities would be developed in them at all, but for the fact of their being required in a mill-hand. Again I say, I presume to speak only of conditions which obtain in the Southern cotton-mills. Here, however, I am able to declare, from long personal observation, that the elevating and civilizing influence of the cotton-mills, among the poor white people of the South, from whom the mill-hands are drawn, is not to be questioned by any fair-minded and intelligent man or woman, who will take the pains to secure information, by personal inspection, regarding the conditions existing to-day.

A short time ago, during a Sunday afternoon drive through a thickly populated mill region in North Carolina, my companion and I stopped to ask for a drink of water at the house of a man who, as we learned, was working a farm on shares, employing his large family of children as helpers. These children—who gathered around our trap with stolid curiosity at the unwonted spectacle of a decently dressed man and woman coming to their home—were ragged, dirty and unwholesome-looking to the last degree, and so stupid that I looked vainly into each of the five small faces turned upward to us for one gleam of intelligence, one sign of politeness, one indication of either native sense or training in conduct. Even when we spoke to them directly, they made no sign of having heard or understood, except to look vaguely at their father, who seemed only a little more responsive and responsible than they. Although it was Sunday, the wretched clothing and unashamed dirtiness of both father and children were shocking to see.

Proceeding on our way, my companion and I were discussing the discouraging scene, when we encountered a party of children of about the same ages as those just left behind, who were coming

out of a Sunday-school, near a large factory building. These were, without exception, cleanly and appropriately dressed—many of them with as much taste and comfort as the children of the prosperous and educated classes. Their faces were bright, intelligent and full of interest both in us and in each other. When we accosted them, they responded with cordiality and politeness, and the books, papers and picture-cards in their hands denoted a certain degree of education and of appreciation of educational subjects.

If it be said that all this was due to the Sunday-school and not to the factory, the answer is that if there had been no factory, there would have been no Sunday-school. These indigent people on the tracts of impoverished lands, which they work without training or intelligence, and with such poor results that a mere subsistence in destitution is the utmost that they get or even expect, are, without the factories, too widely scattered to be within reach of a school of any kind. It has only been by the collecting and centralizing which the mills have effected that their children are brought within reach of schools or teachers. At present, with the urgent demand for skilled labor which prevails all over this region, the cold, commercial argument that education quickens the wits and stimulates the faculties is enough to account for the fact that schools are going up universally in these factory settlements, and that every inducement is being offered by the owners and managers of mills for the children to learn.

Great lamentation has been made over the fact—lamentable, indeed, as it is—that, among this low and inferior class of people, it so often happens that, where the children are earning wages, the parents will not work. In answer to this, I suggest that, in the case of children possessed of such parents, the freedom which comes of the opportunity to work and gain their own living is the best that can be hoped for, by them, in the way of a chance to enter into a larger and more self-respecting life.

If the violent opposers of any sort of child-labor in the mills could see, as I have seen, the tremendous advance in the minds, the physical health and the worldly possessions of the children to whom the factories have given a chance of mental development, manual training and moral instruction—to say nothing of the bodily gain which is the result of good and sufficient food and clothing—they must perforce accept the idea that, to some extent,

the end has justified the means. As to the elders, in several cases which have come within my observation, men who have retained their love for the freedom and open air of country life have returned to the farm, with enormously stimulated faculties, which have been so developed by the training of the mill that they have brought to bear on their country work a degree of intelligence and capacity which has made of them comparatively, if not positively, successful farmers, whereas, without the stimulus and the industry, application and wit that mill-work demands, these men would undoubtedly have gone from bad to worse.

Looked at broadly, the improvement of the poor white people of the South, since factories became common there, is one of the most encouraging and cheering things on the horizon of our social life, and, sad as it is that, at the age intended by nature for the mental and physical development of the young, children should be forced into work and surroundings unfavorable to these, it is a yet sadder sight to see children growing up in the state of mental and physical starvation which is too often the lot of the poor whites in the South, who have no means of subsistence but working the ground, and neither the mental nor the physical training for the successful doing even of that.

No objection seems to be made to the father of the family's working in the mill, while the mother does the housework and the children go to school. But, to make this feasible, the family must live near the mill; and, when it is remembered that the influences which have made the father an indolent and unsuccessful farmer have equally affected the mother, it is too much to expect that they will provide a healthy happy home for their children, or comprehend the value of education for them. It is only after a greater or lesser experience of the stimulating and enlightening effects of skilled labor, and the rich fruit that comes from it, that the parents of these poor children advance so far as to help and direct their offspring to better things. Therefore, if a typical Southern poor-white family moves from the country to a cotton-mill, the best chance for their children is to go into the mill themselves. There they are compelled to learn, at least, the value of order, system, punctuality, and the accurate use of their minds and fingers. The work is of the lightest, as far as any physical tax goes. The boys are almost universally employed as "doffers"—that is, each boy has a certain number of spools to watch, and he must

take off the empty ones and replace them with full ones, as often as is necessary. When his spools are all full, he not only may, but actually does, play games, inside or outside the mill, with his fellow doffers, provided he is not too noisy and does not neglect his spools. The girls, as a rule, are employed to mend the threads which break in the warp, and are given a certain number of looms to tend. No one can possibly pretend that the work is hard. The lamentable fact is that children of this age should have any work which confines them indoors and cuts them off so largely from fresh air and exercise, and prevents their going to school. Here, again, there comes in the question of the alternative. We are not speaking of children in general, but of these particular children. Of them I do not hesitate to say that the alternative to working in the mills is a far more injurious thing to them than mill-work would be. As a rule, the class from which the mill-hands in the South are drawn is the very lowest. In many cases, where the parents work in the mills and the children do not, it is the custom of the parents to lock the children out of the house during working-hours, for fear that clothes and furniture guarded only by children will be stolen. This, in itself, shows the sort of people among whom these young children are growing up, and makes obvious the fact that children living in mill settlements and not at work are exposed to every vicious influence, and are learning only evil—or, rather, this was the case before the establishment of schools; and even yet many of the parents are not themselves sufficiently enlightened to see that their children take advantage of their opportunities to learn out of books. What they can and do learn in the mills, however—and this learning is compulsory and not to be shirked—is to be clean in their dress, decent in their language, orderly and punctual in their habits, and how to use their mental and physical faculties—which goes far toward training them for the making of an honest and industrious livelihood. Besides this, through their own efforts they are supplied with good and nourishing food. It is often said that the factory-hands spend their earnings too lavishly on food and clothes. This is undoubtedly true in the initial stage of their experience, as they are generally quite inexperienced in the handling of money; but, as a rule, they begin in time to get a taste for accumulation. Booker Washington has demonstrated, in his experience with the negro race, the great value of the accumulation of money as a civilizer. Let a man or woman—and

equally a child—get interested in adding dollar to dollar, with some desired end in view, and he will conform his habits more or less to that end. I have found among the parents of these mill-children a universal custom of giving to each child some portion of its earnings, no matter how small, to put by, and on questioning the children, I have always found that they were “saving up” for some definite purpose—a wholesome discipline for the young.

But it is by no means the young alone who stand in need of such teaching and such discipline. All of these Southern mill-workers are drawn from a class so ignorant that they are only just beginning to observe customs which are laws to the more enlightened people, by whom they find themselves for the first time surrounded. The education of the parents, as well as that of the children, should engage the interest and efforts of philanthropic men and women. Since it is necessary to concede the fact that there are, among the mill-hands of the South, some parents who are content to live in idleness and force their young children to work for them, that man would be a benefactor, indeed, who could suggest a manner of appeal to parents which would lead to the correction of such an unnatural attitude on the part of those whose obligation it is, and whose impulse it should be, to care for the lives for whose existence they are responsible. Some good and practical suggestions have been made, which appeal to parents not so much by the natural avenue of affection for their offspring as by the frequently more effectual approach of self-interest. One suggestion is that no child shall be received as a factory-hand who cannot read and write. This would, undoubtedly, be a strong appeal to such parents as are indifferent on the subject to have their children taught, and the effect of such teaching would accomplish much more than its directly intended end, since it would keep the children out of the streets and away from bad associations, for a part of their time at least.

It seems hardly needful that I should declare myself opposed, as every reasoning and right-minded person must be, to the employment of children as mill-hands, where these children are so situated as to have a lot in life which offers a favorable alternative to such employment. Making large allowance for the super-excited state of mind of the writers on this question, who recently have been flooding the press with their more or less rash and ignorant conclusions, there still remains enough of reason and

justice in their assumptions to make it a matter of profound satisfaction that conditions have been much improved at the mills, by reason of the wide-spread interest in the matter and the wholesome, hearty indignation at the wrongs to childhood which, through the ignorance or cruelty of men, are still prevailing. This is a subject well worth the attention of the benevolent and progressive citizens of every section. But, in order that it may be approached with the intelligence, which alone can lead to successful action and effort, let us, by all means, do away with the morbid emotionalism which, in too many cases, tends to obscure the truth, and let us have exact knowledge of the conditions which we are to deal with, instead of accepting, unchallenged, the often totally ignorant or else wilfully perverted statements of too many of the writers on this subject.

Quoting from "The Boston Transcript's" report of a recent meeting of The National Civic Federation held in New York, I ask attention to the following extract from a speech, made at that meeting by a man who was protesting against the report of the Child Labor Committee's work:

"The gross ignorance of writers for the public press is disgraceful. Look at this picture, which accompanied a series of sensational articles in a sensational magazine—the picture of a child at a loom! No child ever stood at a loom. And this statement, appearing in a recent number of a magazine that ought to know better: 'Sixty thousand little children toil in Southern cotton-mills; little girls twelve years old toil through a twelve-hour night.' Now, if all the 9,000,000 spindles in the South were operated by children—and they are not, by any means—they could not employ, at the outside, over 15,000 children. The children are found in the spinning-room only. South Carolina owns more than one-third of all the spindles in the South, and in that State but three spinning-mills work at night, and the looms they run are the twisting-loom, where adult labor is employed, and not children. The statement that 'an adjustable spinning-frame' exists for children is equally absurd. No such device was ever heard of; nor would it be possible."

In the same report "The Transcript" gives a quotation, made by one of the Civic Federation's speakers, from the writings of Herbert Spencer to the effect that, when an evil is at its worst, nobody pays any attention to it; when it is waning, the public pricks up its ears; and, when it is almost gone, everybody wants to rise up and legislate it out of existence. This, "The Transcript" says, "seemed to many to have aptly summed up the situation," and, having seen with my own eyes the improvements

wrought in the condition of child-laborers and the great privileges of education and advancement which they now enjoy, I say the same.

As the public has listened, with such ardent credulity, to the presentation of one side of the question of child labor, it seems only fair to ask that it will listen to the other side. Then, if they will take the trouble to investigate the existing conditions, even to a slight extent, they will easily see for themselves the difference between knowledge and ignorance, true and false, fact and sentimentality.

And now, in approaching the conclusion of this article, I wish to offer, to every candid mind interested in this important subject, the following practical suggestion: Examine carefully the pictures which illustrate sentimental articles on this subject.

I have before me three articles of the kind to which I have referred. They are all written in the same vein of headlong emotion and wild hyperbole. All draw superexcited pictures of the misery, disease and degradation of the children who toil. There is, however, one significant difference in these articles; this lies in the manner of their illustration. One of them is illustrated from drawings, made in a conscientious effort on the part of the illustrator to carry out the spirit as well as the detail of the text handed in for illustration. In this one, the pictures represent a collection of men, women and children so misshapen, diseased, degraded-looking as to be improbable almost to the point of the grotesque. The other articles describe the same horrible state of these small workers, *but*—the illustrations of these latter articles are done by photography, and we find them to represent as healthy, fat and jolly-looking a lot of children as any one need ask to see. In every instance, they are well dressed and even more. Their clothes are made with neatness and even taste, and the rooms in which some of them are photographed are so far from being squalid that they have an appearance of comfort and are supplied with some superfluities. These pictures go to the editor with the manuscript, in the hope that he may find a way to reproduce them, so that they may speak for themselves.

In the book called "The Woman Who Toils," the illustrations give further proof to the same effect. It is amusing to compare the text describing the misery of these people with the photographs which, in part, are used in illustration of it. Other illustrations

are from drawings, and here again we see the discrepancy between the truth of photography and the deception of drawings made to suit the text. "After dinner," says this writer, "we all sat together in the parlor—the general living-room; carpet-covered sofa, big table, few chairs, that's all." Even these words hardly bear out the description of misery and destitution in which the mill-hands lived, which had preceded it, unless the writer considered a plurality of drawing-rooms a necessity to such people; but the picture illustrating this room shows such a neat, comfortable and sufficiently furnished apartment that, after looking at the large bay-windowed, lace-curtained room, supplied with a nice sofa, amply cushioned with embroidered pillows, two comfortably padded Morris chairs, and decorations of potted plants, framed pictures and neat table-covers and antimicassars, to say nothing of several flowered rugs on the carpeted floor, I could but think of the poor-white people in the South, from whom the factory-hands are drawn, and imagine their awe-struck wonder at the mere idea of sitting down to rest in such a room as this.

Finally, I beg my reader to consider once more the point of the alternative to the working of children—those children, at least in the cotton-mills. Suppose that the anti-child-labor agitators get their way, and all the States are forbidden by law to employ child labor. What then? In one of the articles I have referred to there are pictures of small children who are described as being the only supports of sick mothers or infant sisters and brothers. In no instance, however, do these children look diseased and ragged as the text describes them. Suppose the law suddenly prohibits these children from working. What is to become, not only of them, but of those dependent on them? In some instances, one writer declares with elation, they have been taken in hand by the charity organizations. This may be all very well for ten children, or a hundred, or a thousand; but, when we are told that there are nearly two million children employed in money-making occupations, what will become of those children and the people dependent on them when the law forbids children to work? Can the charity organizations provide for two millions of paupers? Is it desirable that they should? Regrettable as is the condition of young children compelled to work for their living, is it not better than that of children dependent on charity—even if the charity were forthcoming, which it certainly is not, and could not be, for

such a multitude? If those who are trying to abolish child labor offered something better as a substitute, every heart and hand should be with them; but this they do not do. Saying that parents should support their children is one thing, and making them do it is another, even in cases where the parents are able to work. And, even if they did do this, such a support as these parents would give, with its inadequate food and clothes, wretched quarters and the degrading influences of idle and vicious associations, would be, I dare avow, a greater injury to the minds and souls and bodies of these children than employment in the mills, where decent treatment is accorded them, and they are given a fair opportunity to learn to make a good living and to help others who may be in need of their help.

Still confining myself within the limits of my own experience, I declare this to be the case in the Southern cotton-mills. Everywhere among them, schools and churches are going up, or have been already in existence; and, by reason of the centralization which a factory necessitates, opportunities of mental, moral and physical training are afforded, which would otherwise be impossible for these children of the very poor.

In writing this article I have been sensibly aware that I was espousing an unpopular cause; but, since listening to the debate on this question in the Senate Chamber, I have not the feeling of trying to lead a forlorn hope. Some real illumination is beginning to dawn upon the public mind, bringing with it some consciousness of the blind credulity with which these various sensational and intemperate articles from the press have been swallowed down. There is a disposition evident to get at the facts on both sides of this burning question, and the plea of the unconstitutionality of interference with States' rights will be urged. This I leave to the consideration of wiser and more experienced minds; but I do not hesitate to claim for myself both wisdom and experience, on the ground which I have taken here, and I am actuated quite as strongly, and I believe with a greater basis of reasoning from fact, by a feeling of sympathy for the rights of childhood, and a desire that its best good may be secured, as are blindly partisan anti-child-labor agitators, who have had the ear of the public so long—too long, I venture to say, for a just and intelligent conception and consideration of this most important matter.

JULIA MAGRUDER,